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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English
Writing Program

You'll Never Love Me
by
Luther Hughes

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2018
St. Louis, Missouri

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Luther Hughes

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2018

To history.

I.

As the Fog Rolls In, Night Finds Its Footing

What's that story about the blackbird
visiting a man, or, more accurately,
his depression? Making him recognize it,
I mean. It was often like that
with birds, reminding you of your flightlessness.
It was like that, then more so, then only that.

I'm doing as much as I can these days
despite thinking about what ails me—
going on walks, slipping into bathroom stalls
with strange men who become not-so-strange
when they pull down their pants—without wanting more
from absence, if a thing can even be considered absent
not having been there to begin with.

If not a blackbird, something that was blackened
by blackness, with an animal understanding,
was in his room. Above. It had wings. No, it didn't.

The Sound of Hunting

I.

His howls, I hear.

Whoever he was, he is
 now nothing
but screams
 and a constellation
of holes.

From habit, more howls.
 The mouth,

I imagine. The blood
 crowning, deep red,
the head
 of a flattened rose,
days sour, fallen
 from its stem.

As if there is anything left,
 I turn
up the volume
 of his suffering,
flinch
 as though seeing
my fly-flooded
 figure pushed
in front
 of the gun's eye.

I am trapped
 by the anchor
of his dying.

The screams have ceased.

The audio over.

I am heavy.

My hands press
against my thighs.

I don't know
how to inhale
death, so I rewind
the audio.

I hear him again
slipping away.

II.

When shot once, scream
but quietly.

When shot a second time, let loose
the lion from your throatcage.

If shot a third time, transform
the lion
into a harp
and strum
your way to sleep.

III.

I speak Trayvon's name
when a man gardens into me.

I watch my blood

blemish the bedsheets like a painting
gone wrong. I ask the man,

What makes you different?

What makes you alive?

*

I claim *I am finding myself*. Because I am finding myself,
I wake, drunk, in the arms of another.

Trayvon is dead, I tell him.
Because I'm black, he is always dead.

*

My hands will not release him into the earth.
I give the night a loose definition of moving on:

blade to the wrist-flesh and a robin
flitting through the thin air like a prayer.

He Went Away Without Saying Goodbye

The flux of the city was comforting
that afternoon.

The Starbucks was closed.
Chase bank, too.

I watched police cars thicket,
watched the ambulance sift through traffic.
What could remain of him?
Found and hideous on both ends,
sopped in his own flush.

Someone from work said, *Better here*
than Suicide Bridge over in Aurora.
As I foxed between the pulsing crowd,
I ached to find myself
within the splash, go rolling in it.
The spread of him flared
my eyes wide, pretty, while the bust of sirens
stabbed and the ill-gotten guts grew ginormous.

I was floored by the thought: the man leaping
from the roof like a shirt thrown out a window,
thrashing its thread and cotton for the wind—
a dance so familiar the breeze would take the cuffs
and twirl twice before leaving. Gentlemen-like.

During lunch, I ran outside into the after-scene.
The thicket shriveled.
The traffic barely combed the streets.
I looked to the sky. It was Pacific blue, blue
enough an orca whale could swim in its deep.
The twinkle of sunbeams serving as waves
crashing on the banks of the mountain range.

I was glad. Not because death promised
arousal: I shook with thirst: the image painting me hypnotized.
For the man. It was a beautiful day
to die. To give yourself back to the horizon.

-James Newton Howard, *The Hanging Tree*

A swallow of flies showers
his open mouth
where the blood crusts.

Dead, he will not speak, I know.
I can see how pain once chewed
the neck blacker than most.

I rest my head against the tree, sleep
and wake in his call.

Like legs of a spider, his nature
extends past his body,

saying,

Like you I once harbored beauty

saying,

Like you my beauty takes the kingdom of blackness.

It is dawn in the man's eyes,
a cavern: a slow thaw to memory.

7

Who is to say what death is or is not?

He has his limbs, a sky overlooking ...

I know he is dead, nothing will change

but still I whisper in his ear,

Breathe. I want you to breathe.

There Will Be Mourning

I'm taking too long.

I'm at a bar
ignoring my friend's call.

I take another shot, a pill, a drag
of a man's cigarette out front.

He smacks my ass.

Cue the war on everything,
a white man bellows.

I pray to a god
who has no eyesight, drink
myself limp: for nerves to numb.

Someone chucks a glass
of tequila into a wall.

I go home, cry
into my roommate's lap.

My mother calls to tell me
a woman from church
has died. *You know her.*

Knew, I say.

Sometimes I react
to things I never touched.

Behind the dumpster, a man
tries to fuck some feeling into me.

Blue where it matters.

I want my roommate to change the channel.

He asks why if nothing will change.

The man I poured myself
into, I can't stop.

Blame "the black" in me.
I feed off the recognition.

The first step in cleaning
is to recognize the infection.

Culture

The headlights remember boys like us: black, unbroken
by the law. As it mans us to the curb, Brandon says
he's been broken before. But not like this. The car parks.
Two white men get out. Their blue uniforms adore their muscles.
You boys up to trouble? I want to kiss the question, make love to the word
"boys" as I have seen in porn. We're told to sit. It's cold, Demicus complains.
So busy studying the officers' pelvises, I don't notice the flashlights searching
our faces, our bird chests, our legs. I wanted to touch what hung between their thighs.
Got a call about some houses being broken into. Know anything about it?
Prayer would be wise, but I don't remember. Brandon says we're heading
to his house up the street and tosses his eyes. A flashlight pulls from his shoes
to his lips, shimmering. Here, in the Southend, others know this recycled story.
One by one, we are searched. Nothing in my friends' pockets, a pen in mine.
They don't know how, after the frisk, the black boy in the porn is then scripted
to blow the officers. I think tonight will be the night I'm written into the perfect angle
but the production crew never arrives. I'm not headlined. I'm sitting next to Demicus
in Brandon's bed talking about the rest of our night. Demicus says he has an idea
and Brandon looks at me. We know what we came here to do. I take off my shirt,
my basketball shorts, my boxers, say, *Stop bullshitting and take off your clothes.*

Survey of Lust

I wrench the bone from my maw for three minutes before it flutters into a raven. You shove the raven inside your jeans, watch saliva thumb the chin. My fingers parenthesis my elbow, I shake. I hear many erotics: engines, wind-wrestled rain, humming glass. The raven begins again, pecking until your palm waxes it tender. I canvass your eyes: Cornea. Pupil. Iris. Lens. When I reach the vitreous body, I choke: *Fuck me. Fuck me, shapeless*—would I have known? I? Who wanted a man inside him. As thunder amputates the sky, the light above us grows blind. The raven swells, culls my attention. What I imagine: my hand thrusting the fowl by the throat until it chirps blood.

Nocturne

If you did not see me at the end
of our stillness, then what?

It takes my joints some work
to do what the heart desperately craves,

but my mind is like a river, leaving
just to re-enter a few moments later,

second-guessing, wanting to find some new
revelatory thing. Most dreams, I open the front door

to find you on the porch letting the sky gown you—
half-silk, half-veil: delicate.

The riverbed is never empty, you would say
with your back facing me.

Then whatever wrestled my window
jarred me awake. The window must have

wanted to be open. Or, the window needed
distracting from all that waiting.

The dream was never wrong.
Listen: I know objects cannot feel.

I know you must be thinking
I, too, should not wait for someone else

to open me. I have come this far.
Not as an object, as I would usually

have you to believe, only reacting
to what has manipulated me. You see,

my lust is always moving
inward and outward; little rose petal

in the wind ... I want to do something about my lust.

Listen: I know I should just do it, put my tongue
to the flame—take me. Tonight, I am deeper
than I have ever been.

Sovereignty By Any Other Name

Somewhere between the sunken dark
and the moon's anemic blush, a shadow
opening his pants. *Artistic*, some would say.
Others might spin the scene: *Intruder. Malice.*
Those are beautiful words, too. Like a ruined
church can sometimes become artifact: sickled
wall, abandoned—a legion of dust. The language
used will be that of history. I don't mind.
If a deer is still a deer after the coyote releases it
from its mouth, is it the chase that excites?
If the coyote still hungers, does the deer
hold all the power? By now, I am eager—
I want to be digested. As darkness enters,
it is he who belongs to me.

Sweet Tooth

The hawk wasn't the first I've made an omen out of being
as it perched in the puddle in the middle of the street, feckless.
Though the hawk remained unruffled, it studied my approach
as any would when threatened. I did what most might have done: took
a picture as proof. I couldn't say what the picture would prove
besides the hawk's existence. Perhaps, I'm siphoning a reason
where there isn't one. Something trivial in the ways
in which I understand intimacy. I don't think I'm wrong about this.
Had I not known intimacy before, I'd say the hawk was pure violence—
talons and hooked beak. No tenderness. That part, easy. I know
I'm slighting its hawkness as simply such, but ignorance
is of the body, too: a mole, a lonely parasite ... What is it about parasites
that makes my blood frenzy? They must have their own lexicon for love—
teeth in the tiny heart, a thread of bonework, grounds for taking a leap
into the unknown.

Whatever takes up inside me, let it be beautiful.

I'm not saying to let the parasite make me an orchard. I already bear enough
fruits of labor. I'm saying no matter the harm, I need, always, to be full.

II.

Ode on the Middle Passage

I double and double under another
 Spoon-fished hooked into the splintered ship we a gallery of bodies
 I hear my bones purr
 Rattle a little psalm
 A little salt
My limbs fold
 My folds creek then hollow out into a flick
How long til we get there
 I smell dyin
 I died hours ago
Hungry and my stomach murmurs a blade of grass
 I sick
 Spew across the floor
 Onto black
 Into a pile of excrement
I hear the white man's voice claw at the winds
 I hope he opens us up for air
 For cleanin
He don't
I try to breathe but black next to me says quit hoggin all the air
 I shut my lungs til I plum the face
The chains around my wrist tear through everythin
 Skin snatched back
 A fish out of water
 I stretch what I got left
The black three rows away hums somethin familiar
 Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me
 I join
 Hate bein left out
 The black above me joins in
 Coughs then jingles his chains
The black below me is dead
 We chained together

I continue to hum

The sea hums with us

The black won't stop singin

I look around Steal air in slices
down

I look around See mornins flame serpentine I look

See blood freckled across my knee

Is that mine

The black won't stop singin

I an ailed bird with no song
everythin

I think a beehive swallowed my tongue

I think of swallowin

I try swallowin myself

The black won't stop singin

I scorpion my naked spine

I pry my beak

I dust

I pry my beak and

The black won't stop singin

I cough
with my mouth

I wet slick into a wave

I think I'm drownin

I ghost Cup the ghost

Where did my tongue fly off to

I wave and fly and drown til the ship slow down

I down

The black won't stop singin

I lose everythin I choir a rattlesnake behind my eyelids I eye my kneecap
Is that my blood

I bite my lip to feel human The flesh hang my beak A child gone astray Is that my
blood

The black won't stop singin

I spin my head between teeth I pray and watch the black move

An animal in dirt I dirt I cling to everythin

I body in a sack of skin I body in a sack in a ship headin to Lord knows where

The black won't stop singin

Sing Sing Sing
Sing Louder Don't
Louder Louder Slower

Ignore Pray Pray
Pray Pray Pray
Pray Pray Pray

Pray Sing Sing
Shout Sing Shout
Breathe Breathe Sleep

Sleep Sleep Ignore
Sleep Cough Bleed
Cough Cough Breathe

Bleed Bleed Slower
Slower Bleed Bleed
Slower Slower Slower

Ode to the Whistle Boy

O sweet boy, my sweet boy, are you there?
O blue boy, my blue boy, are you there?
O dead boy, my dead boy, what's the noise?
O Till boy, my Till boy, many heard.

O chunked boy, my chunked boy, can you breathe?
O blue boy, my dear boy, can you breathe?
O filled boy, my filled boy, what's been said?
O Till boy, my Till boy, they got some nerve.

O river boy, my river boy, can't you swim?
O blue boy, cotton-gin boy, can't you swim?
O bullet boy, bullet-head boy, can't you move?
O Till boy, my Till boy, does it burn?

O blood boy, my blood boy, don't you worry.
O blue boy, southern-blue boy, don't you worry.
O whistle boy, lovely whistle boy, see ya kin?
O Till boy, my Till boy, ya've been tortured.

O stripped boy, stripped clean boy, heaven'll come.
O blue boy, August-blue boy, heaven'll come.
O black bird, my black bird, they cracked ya wings.
O Till boy, my Till boy, ya breath deferred.

O croon boy, bye baby boy, I'm sick of their shit.
O blue boy, revenge-blue boy, I'm sick of their shit.
O resurrect boy, resurrect-boy, wanna see you rise.
O Till boy, my Till boy, I see ya conjured.

O Tallahatchie boy, Tallahatchie boy, let's go a haunting.
O blue boy, haint-blue boy, let's go a haunting.
O please boy, pretty please boy, can't we go a killing?
O Till boy, my Till boy, we will slit their throats.

Custody

When he crawled out from the river, clothes
fragmented, a bad argument, there were no signs
of loss, except for his eyes that asked,
Have you seen my mother?

The day, teeming blue, was mostly spring.
I handed him a slice of watermelon
knowing he wasn't hungry, knowing he'd take
the fruit to his mouth, let the juice glide down his chin.

To ask him what it felt like to be free
of the thing that once consumed, to slip away,
would be customary like blood streaming from a bullet wound—
that's what it looked like: the parade of holes
that peppered his torso.

I held him until he became part of me, until
the sky forgot itself a sky and the wind mumbled.
There, there, to smother his misery. But I was mistaken.
What I thought was his voice writhing, sobbing,
was the frantic voice of the river asking for his return.

Ode on Seattle

I lie. Above ground. Like I'm saving myself. I'm not humble. I'm a Seattle boy. Boy broken open. Boy who breaks open for other boys. In Seattle, I fracture. I speak city. I kiss rain. I Seattle. Next to a blanket of water. I jump in. Like I'm swimming myself. I sink. I'm not a needle. I overcast the darkness. I blue. In Seattle, I slip inside myself. My family ashore. They wave. I'm nothing but head. Sink. I'm nothing but bubbles. Drown. I'm salt against salt against wet flesh. I lose focus. I sweet talk myself. I pray a wetness. I'm saving myself. In Seattle, there's space. *Can you hear me?* I can't, I'm drowning *remember*. I left. In Seattle, I leave everything. Like I'm saving myself. My family ashore. They run in. Splash. I speak oxygen. Seize oxygen. Seattle is rain. I coddle Seattle on my tongue. I'm not humble enough to live. But I do. Because.

I am like the petty child who prefers everything
to make sense, flinging various reasons into the furnace
until one wildfires. So, for days I studied the league
of dead trout left half-trout on the bridge. I am hungry.
I have yet to see a pelican whittle into a fish
with its precious beak but I have felt my virgin-flesh
whine beneath another like a seashell stained by summer wind.
 I forget what I said when I first saw the dead.
 From a certain slant, their scales were soiled with the lake's blue pucker.
They lied there on the bridge—gemstones; nothing-nothing.
 I lied there too.
 There's a slow gospel that vinegars the tongue when made to heed.
Pain, too, can be spiritual. None of the birds I saw that day warned me.
The voice that smeared *relax* into my ear all those years ago
 stumbled onto the shore with each suckling wave.

Barkless, Without a Fight

I was molested. Everything was
a game. The story chores.
I played in places that didn't
have a mouth. It was August.
There was a couch
where the moon watered.

Sometimes possession
is a complex animal.
Sometimes what hides
also defines. As in,
you my nigga.

It was September.
I wore the basement
like a love song. Inside
his pants, a pair of fangs.
A safety word. It didn't hurt
long and the fireplace bled.

Blood is the same texture
no matter where. Mine was
a hairless lamb: rose-eyed
and seething.

It sounds crazy: the hum of a heater
the moment you start listening
after not having been, not once, listened to

when begging to stop. There's a myth
about that isn't there? A man falling
in love with another's disregard?

Beneath him, I imagine him
a small child lying on top of a pile
of freshly fallen leaves.

Another deacon touched a little boy,
the local news tells me. I tell my mother
and she cries; I'm not that child

anymore, I reassure her. Although, I was
never. At least not in this context.
I haven't forgotten about the smaller things:

the ceiling light rewarded with gnats.
I'm quick to dead something. Nothing lives
the way I want it to. I'm entered, I'm an exit.

When he handed me my underwear, it was like
a confession. I miss his voice. It was like one of those
things you're told exist but never actually see.

In a dream, I unpacked
tirelessly my bones. For what
is a home if not something
returned to? I unpacked

and repacked: insanity,
the right cologne. I'm asked
what makes one remember.
Time, my bones respond.

If it were that simple, I'd be
everywhere. No telling how
long it takes the dream to finish.
I just got here. I'm just visiting.

What say I, the drool-flooded tiger of want? There is always a day I give to my devil.

Today, a man sends me a picture of his dick, its eye already emitting the right lush. The man follows with:

What you on

Nice dick. You tell me.

What you tryna get into

I send him an old picture of my ass hiked high

Here you go. Where do you live?

I stay off Rainier down the street from Safeway

I'm bored with this conversation, touch myself a little

You're far.

Where you at

Too far. Maybe another time.

In the clinic waiting room, a man grabs my hand. I repeat my number in my seat. The walls hold a few specks of history and a painting of an arrogant zinnia says, *Kill yourself*.

I prefer dahlias. Inside me, the wrong kind of love. The room labors. The man turns around in his chair. I pretend nothing. The nurse calls my name and I pretend nothing. It was April. The doctor crushes a pill for me. Gives me a shot.

A few years pass, and time tells all: in the clinic waiting room, a survey:

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex with the same partner?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you had unprotected sex with multiple partners?

I pretend nothing.

How many times in the past twelve months have you pretended nothing?—

Fine, I'll answer the questions. He was a parasite: he tore through a fish's gill, ate the tongue, then became it.

I trifle.

I want to control many things about the room: the doorway, the texture of the chairs, the receptionist. Some things are easier. I want this to go easy.

My lover tells me to slow down
look him in the eyes
Little does he know
I was elsewhere
a field between us
a field I have fallen into
When I returned
the deed was done
I studied the mess
I was nowhere

It was June
When it comes to growth I prefer June

I watch a man shoot
a shot

of whiskey into his mouth
He prefers my mouth

and the liquor blackening
our throats Hours this blackening

Suddenly we are two heaps
of muscles Brackets Who heap

and hunt *Where did it all begin*
your obsession with touch I began

as the root for black Dark
spot in the pupil Dark

layer of filth With my brother
I say he

touched me

I said he touched me
and the story goes elsewhere:

I see a swan dirtied by lake water.

The ghost flower isn't spiritual. It was the season.

Lying a type of body.

Okay. I took a razor to my wrist.
I swallowed a panther of pills.

Okay. It was summer. I saw him cracked-out on the corner of Rainier and Othello. My friend offered him a ride. He knew him: childhood friends. I pretended nothing. Every time I investigated the rearview mirror, he was in the backseat. Where else would he be? My friend asked, "How have you been?" "Everywhere." He was timeless. Why can't death be this easy? He asked me how long it's been between us. He asked how my parents were doing. He said remember that time we played bloody knuckles in his bed all night. He said we were reckless kids.

Sorrow might say I look for him everywhere.

Are you okay? Do you need therapy? **No.**

I Google, “post-traumatic stress disorder.” I skim. I watch TV. I have myself a glass of wine.

Someone says, *Some lucky boys are just born with the talent of violence.*

The quote scratches.

I kill the bottle.

I know how I got here.

The red buckeye tree nags to be noticed. When the wind punctures the branches, there is a small whine against my window. Child in pain: the tree wrung by the wind's appetite.

I have more stories about things taken, no consent. About power and something—someone—unmade beneath a star-pocked-sky. I belong to many. Enough about me.

Even trees—yes, trees—are forced. Barkless, without a fight.

Some call me psychotic to see abuse in all that breathes. The next morning: a tree split in fourths, red foliage freckling the pavement. There is wind.

You Ain't Ever Gonna Fly

Spilled from a tree branch, Unknown vanishes.
A wick of light lingers where
the mouth once sprang
and snapped and bribed Unknown home.
A wick of light lingers,
slacks when the earth opens below
and snaps to bribe Unknown home,
begs Unknown to rid breath, let rest survival.
Slacking, the earth opens below.
Unknown is less known, more undone. The wind
begs Unknown to rid breath, let rest survival.
Not a single voice troubles this cruelty, this
Unknown less known, more undone. The wind,
bringer of bones, carries their music, but
not a single voice troubles this cruelty, this
silkless tradition of sorry. I,
bringer of bones, carry their music, but
who am I? Who rallies my nerves into
a silkless tradition of sorry? I
belong to many or I belong to none. I test
who I am, who rallies my nerves into
a hyphen of blood. *Blood*, the first language,
belongs to many or it belongs to none. I test
what I can grammar, read
a hyphen of blood—*blood*, the first language
of violence. I prostrate. I stroke the glorious face,
what I can grammar, read
the salt's last glimpse of self,
of violence. I prostrate. I stroke the glorious face.
The freedom in surrendering is sometimes
the salt's last glimpse of self.
To solder the two—death and power—is lifting.
The freedom in surrendering is sometimes
nature's way of getting back what has been promised.
To solder the two—death and power—is lifting,
yes. But sad. The animals weep. The trees join

in nature's way of getting back what has been promised:
spilled from a tree branch, Unknown vanishes,
is one color shy of naught and decay lingers

Faith Opens the Trapdoor

When, all day, I realized the dead
sparrow in the not-yet dandelions
marked depression, I looked through
the tree to find a half-nest perched
at the highest branch.

Looking through, I found not only
an almost-home but the question of full
versus empty. I wanted to be full
and thought the tree was sick
of the sparrow's labor.

Now, empty of wings, the nest
proved still. I believe a thing can be
both restless and at rest. Take the blood
the way it's both a stream and the boat.

God is like that: swelling as he enters
from behind. Sometimes, I wear nothing
but his mercy, the myth of flesh.
Then, at times, I alarm like a warning
to what's coming—I am dangerous.

I wonder if he can taste the sadness—

Earlier, I overhear
and repeat it out loud
while studying

the video
of a black man
fucked by a larger

white man, longer
in his stroke, a rhythm
so unfamiliar, so alien,

I rewind the video
to the earliest kiss
before the white man

grabs his ass, says,
I can't wait to get into that.
A script. A script adopted

when I respond,
Your dick is so damn beautiful
to a video

sent to me, unsolicited.
I wasn't lying, though
hunger can make me

forget otherwise.
The last time
I spoke the word sadness

out loud, I was reading
a caption that said,
Ask me how I'm keeping it together.

I've sung enough songs
to know the difference
between whatever is true

and whatever trusts. Take
the mouth. Take the mouth
that asks for a condom.

A Wretch Like Me

Like one of those slave ships, I harbored.

Only, I wasn't a ship.

Or at least not the type that brought slaves
to labor. I was neither the ship

nor the water that kept the two.

I was the tune come crooning

from the soot mouth, leaping

black to black to the almost corners

where a young boy who, now tossed
overboard, coughs bile into his hands

while singing. Let me be clearer. I was a song.

I made men feel good when throated.

When he, not the boy but my lover—

only, he wasn't my "lover."

He was like one of those horse flies, furious
for death. When he wanted release,

I gave him a door. At the bottom of the door,
rainwater pooled, reflected: my body

splashed open like freshly hammered wood; the moth
that flickered a curse below the light

before falling ill against the window; him.

As if the door was a present thought owed.

Let me be even clearer. When he needed

to fuck, he scoured my insides.

Benevolence

I place my mouth on what he calls his weak spot.
We are in my mother's bed. It is relative to say
the cherry blossoms washing her bedspread
wanted to do something with their pink.
He says he has been there before, to the place where
I ended up: broken: a few chips of blood
that, when I say, *Blood*, does nothing.

For the rest of the afternoon, I look at how simple
the sky is when empty. I could watch nothing
stay nothing. When I lift myself up from his musk,
he asks where I am going. Sometimes the questions asked
are not from a mouth but are from the room. When I exit,
it should not ask why or from whom. *The room is a room.*
I open the door. I devour the house.

Heat

Between the staggered trees
a quilt of deer graze

Where a boy was
shot

For having a face
that reminded someone

Of terror The deer
taking in the earth

How it was given are holy
the way a chest is holy

After inhaling a choir
of bullets I too bleed

When the black cop
swears at me

To lick his pistol
I do I want

The breadth of the metal
to swell in my throat

Before placing the barrel
in my mouth

I say simply
The boy did nothing

Wrong He says
Don't move

He unloads
the pistol

I swallow

I Want to Talk About Water

Though it might lead to drowning. I hardly remember
the sound. The gulp my throat made. Tell me
your throat is similar. The soft walls expanding
then resting. It was okay. I had enough room
from never being whole. Was that good enough reason?
There are many for wanting to die. I flooded
a white spider in the kitchen corner, poured it down the drain.
A white butterfly muttering above, smashed then flushed.
I was the type of blackness who knew his power,
so I owned it. When a white boy asked me to break him
in the bathtub, I swelled. Inside him, he hurt.
His expression filled. A year later, I thirsted for that.
I drank wine in old bathwater and heard the rain seeping
beneath the earth's thick coat like a fever. I let go
under the weight, gave in, gave legs to fullness,
imagined a blue ocean. That formless thing
so wide, so needed. A home in that wet.
But I came back. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you
get out the tub, run outside into the rain screaming *mine*?

III.

Apotheosis

The doctors have him
on pills. Just pills, he says.
Never giving the name
as if to hold on
to some sort of power.
I'm surprised by how much
of my father he still is
despite his own withering.
While he has stopped drinking,
he has picked up weed.
Somehow, this is better for him.
He asked if I wanted to smoke.
As we stood outside
in the parking lot, I watched
him: he brought the blunt
held perfectly between
his thumb and index finger
to his lips, closed his eyes,
inhaled, and blew
a heavy bale of smoke
that diluted his face
for a moment. *Did you know
the Old Man died a few days ago?*
That's how he'd ask
me about his father
every year. Yes.
Our voices slumping
back to silence.
Or instead of talking
about his father's death,
he'd asked, *Did you know
about the black kid
that was shot?* I heard.
Sometimes when I tell
my friends that I smoked
with my father, they say

I'm lucky. I despise
that opinion. Scoff
and roll my eyes.
I want to talk to my father
about other things:
It was a nice day, the sun
wadded in the blue sky.
I wasn't promoted.
I'm seeing someone.
But it is always this:
death and who
belongs to it.
It's not his fault. I suppose.
His eyes wandered
over the parking lot,
to his car, and then back
to me. I wanted to say,
I understand. Still being
my father, he frightened me
a little. I always saw
in his eyes, discipline:
a smooth smack of his hand
or a leather belt to the behind.
And just then, in his eyes,
sadness. I saw my grandfather
trying to speak.
The things the dead want
to tell us but can't.
When the blunt got too small
for me, he took one
last drag, threw it
to the ground, and smashed it
with his old work boots.
Ready to go inside,
he asked. I wasn't.
I walked three steps
behind him, his head down.

My father's mind must be thick
with the thought of dying by now.

Considering Death

My grandmother beat a bat to death
with a shovel, my friend says. Another's uncle
split a snake in two. On the highway, a dead wolf.
Yesterday, a squirrel with its skin and innards divorced.

I am alive. I have to say that sometimes.

Grief is as clingy as it seems. It's winter.
The trees recycle something I don't. Stubborn things.
The past is endlessly cruel with its venom, always
poisoning the song of my day. What do I expect?
I have no more grandparents. My will to nurture worms
with the night and the night sheds its wet.
Plants don't trust me, ignore my existence.

—I apologize. I'm not usually like this. Once I swam
in a man's beast and it was good. So good.
While the crickets violined, he milked
his tongue: *Let's go again*. The trees gagged
his window—so good. The next morning, a herd
of dead animals I couldn't figure ...

It Was Snowing and It Was Going to Snow

Sometimes I admire the way the scrimmage between crows
for scraps of carrion thrown to the dumpster sounds.
It's not something I often hear these days. There's no shame in that.
But, without shame, the ability to foster guilt, am I still considered human?
The drama of thoughts like these breed reasoning.
Think the hue of sex. I should know better
than to sacrifice intelligence for pleasure.
Is that what makes art
so desirable? What makes the flesh tasteful? I should stop
listening to animals lose their mind for blood but my neighbors can't stop
fucking so why pretend? A man explodes inside me a few times
a month. He asks if I've ever seen that movie
where a group of crows dive-bomb a boy in the field.
A murder, I say. A group of crows is called a murder.

Obsequy

I.

I should give the robin a proper burial given the season, rather
the month, of my grandfather's death.

I was told there's a theory that describes different types of remembering.
What harvests my memory: the city wearing the horizon
like a rash. I open the backdoor to a wooden porch, patch
of green on concrete. Something outside wants this to be easy.
Instead of scouting the source, I toss the yard the bird, sweep dust
into the corner. I'm repressing.

Two dreams ago, my grandfather was an animal paralyzed
in a field. It's been years, this beast. A friend asks if I had time
to name the bird, what would it be? My answer: *not yet*.

II.

Behind the robin, a scatter of weeds—dandelions, daisies, thistles—
my father thirsts to uproot. The grass around is stale-yellow.
The sky carries grey. When I touch the bird, my fingertip digs,
disappears, is—never mind.

About being broken, the fence with a small hole
in the middle. The chronic problem with openness is where.
What enters: a wind, a lament that forces surrender
over the bird.

It doesn't rain—of all the seasons in Seattle, not this.
I hear a siren chime, fade. My father screams my name
from the window, but the window is closed.

III.

How many times have I seen the dead robin between gravel, greenery,
and the ugly stains left by midnight's storm? Every angle captures
darkness. Where the scarlet belly avails the disrobed feathers, a tiny fist-
sized hole.

I can forge many things: my love for overcast, patterns, nostalgia
for my grandfather.

What if, instead of "bury," we say, "decorate?"
Isn't that graceful—the tongue dabbing the roof to feel favored?

I know it's inconsiderate of me to muscle beauty into everything.
I don't speak when I decorate the bird with my shoe and dirt.
What I mean is, there once was a robin.

Fallen Angel

Blue, what could be sky
unknotted—bluer even
 than a lake shuffling
into the lungs,
the lungs forgetful
 of self, a blackness
that tars every inch of inside.
Therefore, my inside is mysterious.
 My wings want to blossom
and ask: *Am I still wings?*
There are animals
 that can't be named surrounding.
A violence. A sex
without erection.
 Eventually, I'm without closure—
transparent. Anything can fit:
a heart, a bird, a second penis.
 There is a mouth
I call mine
but given to the wind: red
 how blood is red
when it frees itself
from the I. Today, the I
 is master: a horse with wings
that pearl when the blue sky lathers
and the horse emerges
 through the clouds
sifting the faint hairs
like waves before the mammal
 collapses against the shore, tired
from being horse, howling—
the legs howling—*Amputate me.*
 Yet, I am no horse.
My eyes sink into the skull
behind the jelled sphere
 like a snail vanishing
beneath the sand.
Look at all my colors.
 What my body takes.

The sun crystallizing me
into a fossil.

Elegy, Almost

You Google “Tamir Rice.”

Google says:

People also ask:

- Who killed John Crawford?
- Where was Michael Brown shot in Ferguson, Missouri?
- When was Jamar Clark shot?
- Who is Oscar Grant?
- Who are the officers involved in the Freddie Gray case?

You take a picture of your face. You sleep recklessly.

The church prays for your deliverance. You turn
the corner like any maggot turns in a graveyard.

You’re only a matter of time:

- Who killed Luther Hughes?
- Where was Luther Hughes shot in Seattle, Washington?
- When was Luther Hughes shot?
- Who is Luther Hughes?
- Who are the officers involved in the Luther Hughes case?

The hole in your head is like any old hole, you tell yourself.

A man slides in. Any old hole, you remember. You watch
the news, you tweet. Your cell phone dies

before you send the picture. You’re not like them other
niggas you whisper in his ear. You’re alive. You’re not
Tamir or John or Michael or Jamar or Oscar or Freddie.

Look how God shows his grace when you breathe, heave
when being run through. You count to three before clicking:

“Tamir Rice Shooting: A breakdown of the events that led to the 12-year old’s death”

A video:

Tamir...Police car...Police men...Guns pulled...Altercation...Gun
shots...Dead

all heavens are for black boys
all will be heaven for black boys
black boy heaven for all
for all black heaven
will the black boy go, will he heaven
will heaven be a black boy
boy be black in heaven
all boys that are black will heaven
heaven will be black for all black boys
let heaven be in every black boy
black boys take heaven wherever they go
wherever you go black heaven
heaven goes wherever you heaven
you go to heaven black boy
all your black boys will heaven
all black boys want heaven
all boys black for heaven
for heaven a will for boys
a will for black boys is heaven

It's the middle of death season.

You live with dead bodies because you keep searching for them.

You take turns with yourself, imagine what coffin they'll lay you in.

Mahogany, marble.

You think love couples with violence.

You visit a clinic to get rid of yourself.

Before doctors, you had nothing but a history of names.

Now you can add yourself, you think.

A testament: just this one pill this one time.

It's not the end for you.

Swear it.

Obsession Gets on One Knee

Still, everything is dead. Doesn't everybody see
how the day skulls its dying? The sound of rain peeling
back the sidewalk. I skulk about everything.
My dead dog. The dead deer flashed open on the highway.
A car drips in its passing: *every single day every time I pray I'll be missing you*
Sometimes a tree broken for my misery. Deserted.
A fly hurls itself against my window, each
thump thump thump a heart unraveling.
Nothing ...
I am selfish. The birds outside molt for me. The flowers study new skin.
In the mirror, my mouth lurks behind the dead mouth.
Every mouth the same strand. I give the room its thunder.
The fly drops dead.

Object Permanence

You were missing and nobody said
to look for your light. It wasn't asked,
but *suicide* was mentioned. *Lynched*, first.

It's morning now.
I'm watching a teenage boy toss a basketball
into the air while sitting under a tree.

I admit that it's been some time
since I thought of the body
as something past tense.
How does it feel to be
both memory and, like a moon
hanging in the afternoon sky, here?
It is *hanging*, right? Not *hung*?

Morning was mentioned.
I haven't forgotten. Quickly, I can lose myself
if I'm not too careful.
The choice between giving up
and breathing can be difficult.

I know. Kind of. I once watched
a cockroach swim in a sink full of water
and then with some form of hell,
stop, as if the choice was so simple:
a craving for heaven.

My mother raised me better
but I still enjoyed watching the lowly thing
flail its legs, slowing with each movement.
Small moments of pleasure.

Back home in Seattle, the wind is tender.
At times, foul. It lifts me up
against the closest tree
and the tree, like a bell, rings.

Passed Down

You see him, dead now, you said.
Her and her, dead, too. Your face
so unchanged in the year of too much rain.
It wasn't the year I loved a man

with a head bald like yours, but after.
Summer, I worked by Puget Sound
and you were happy I was home. The city
always told me best: *Your grandfather is dead.*

Since you have the same name, it's safe
to assume part of you is dead, too.
The living room never settled so kindly.
On the walls, pictures of your new children,

who later that year refused to buy your pills
and you cried on the phone to me, said sorry.
The year of crying. The year of cracking
into men and the men ridding themselves.

I have the same name too. The year
of collective dying. What I thought was mine
belonged to you first. To think otherwise
was foolish of me. When your father died,

the crows sorrowed the sky and the field lost
its green heart. It was out of the blue, you
showing me the old photo, digging it out
from a box beneath the TV. You look like him,

a man told me, meaning my grandfather,
meaning already dead, a sapped star.
He clothed me carefully like a tradition,
like a bitter chain passed down through generations.

Forgive me for the meaning I make of this.
You gave me a chain with your father's gold ring.
It broke. I never told you. Forgive me
for being careless with your mourning.

Forgive my bones, my healthy little animals,
for bringing his face into your house. I'm glad
my dad got us out of Mississippi, you said, your voice
sprouting for the first time after months of surgeries.

I sat, picture in hand, eyeing all the dead smiles
the ground has grown tired of. The year of extreme
heat, you said. You opened the back door
and the city, being merciful, gifted a breeze.

Aubade

This is the best time to say it is misleading
to sing in the presence of death. If you do not
agree, don't. This much is certain, a father shoots
his son for being gay. Silence, or whatever it calls itself
after a bullet passes through the first layer of husk, must
have stepped into the scene like a musical rest.
Soon the scene was just a scene.

It is late. I am in bed. My bedside lamp projects
its numbing. A calmness about the open door
and I forget what defines me. The darkness, as it grows,
says to be still. In the morning, there is nothing but.

Notes

You'll Never Love Me, is a line from, "Garden (Say It Like Dat)" by SZA.

The epigraph in "A Shiver in the Leaves," is from, "The Hanging Tree," from the movie *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1*. This poem borrows language from "The Yoke" by Frank Bidart.

"You Ain't Ever Gonna Fly," borrows its title from, "Blackbird," by Nina Simone.

The song lyric in "Ode on the Middle Passage" is from, "Amazing Grace" written by John Newton. "A Wretch Like Me," borrows its title from the same song.

The quote, "Some lucky boys are just born with the talent of violence," in "Barkless, Without a Fight," is from the TV show, *Game of Thrones*.

"It Was Snowing and It Was Going to Snow" borrows its title from, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens.

"[all heavens are for black boys]" is after, "Everywhere in the World They Hurt Little Black Girls," by Tafisha Edwards.

The song lyric in the poem, "Obsession Gets on One Knee," is from "I'll Be Missing You," by Puff Daddy.

"Passed Down," is after, "Bird in the House," by Natasha Trethewey.